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ABSTRACT

This study systematically analyzed all public access channel programming on a New York City cable television system in an attempt to answer two basic questions: (1) What was the content of the programming for the initial two year period of operation? and (2) What initial directions, if any, did the programming take during the first two-year period? Program content was investigated utilizing content analysis methodology and coding all broadcasts into one of 11 categories: entertainment, news, public affairs, informational, religious, instructional, sports, political, children's, miscellaneous, and experimental art. Program content was determined from a questionnaire which each producer was required to complete when submitting programming for the access channels. The results of the program analysis indicated that (1) there has been a steady increase in both the amount of air time and in the number of programs cablecast on the channels; (2) much of the programming was community oriented; (3) most of the programming tried to present material which was unavailable to the audience via broadcast television; and (4) the growth pattern for the initial two years suggests that the channels can be a viable medium for communication on a neighborhood level.
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THE ELECTRONIC NEIGHBOR: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF PUBLIC ACCESS CHANNEL PROGRAMMING ON A
NEW YORK CITY CABLE TELEVISION SYSTEM

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THE ELECTRONIC NEIGHBOR: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF PUBLIC ACCESS CHANNEL PROGRAMMING ON A
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The growth of cable television has been accompanied by myriad projections for the use of cable technology to expand our potential for communication. One of the most often discussed aspects of cable technology has been the large number of channels cable can offer as opposed to conventional broadcast television. It is this large channel capacity which has made feasible the idea of reserving a channel to be utilized solely by the public on a first-come, first-served basis.

These channels, commonly referred to as "public access" channels, are now required by law on all cable systems operating within the top 100 U.S. television markets. In its 1972 Cable Television Report and Order, the Federal Communications Commission required each cable operator to make one such channel available for the public's use. The F.C.C. also permitted those systems in operation prior to March 31, 1972, a five year grace period in which to establish public access.¹ Consequently, most cable systems which will be ultimately required to provide access channels are not as yet complying with the regulation. However, cable systems operating in New York City have been required, as a matter of local franchise regulation, to operate two such public access channels since July 1, 1971. Since the local regulation does not contradict the F.C.C.'s mandate but only expands upon it, New York City is the first major metropolitan area in the nation to have experience with a formal public access structure. While there may be some difficulty in generalizing directly from New York City's

experience to other cable systems located elsewhere throughout the country, an analysis of the public access experience in New York can provide valuable data for assessing the ultimate viability of public access and can also serve as a useful model for the growth and development of access channels nationwide.

Many communication researchers have viewed public access as a potentially significant step in communication. Kletter stated that "public access is one of cable television's most significant prospects."² The Sloan Commission Report on Cable Communications recommended that public access channels be required on all cable television systems.³ Former F.C.C. Commissioner Nicholas Johnson has viewed public access on cable television as the first real opportunity for citizen access to the powerful television medium.⁴

The reasons behind these statements are obvious. Broadcast television's channel capacity is severely limited by the electro-magnetic spectrum in which it operates. Consequently, only a relatively few channels can be assigned to any one geographic area. Cable technology, with its virtually unlimited channel capacity, can provide a large number of channels, many of which can be reserved for special use. Many cable systems in operation today have over 20 channels available and it is estimated that up to 100 separate channels are technically feasible with modern technology.⁵ Cable television also offers the advantage of signal specificity. Unlike broadcast television which must radiate its signal over a wide region, cable signals can be sent to specially determined areas. Thus, cable offers the potential for communication on a local neighborhood level, between community residents. Underlying the F.C.C.'s decision to mandate

public access channels was the belief that

there is increasing need for channels of community expression and the steps we are taking are designed to serve that need. The public access channel will offer a practical opportunity to participate in community dialogue through a mass medium.⁶

The need for additional channels of communication, particularly in large, urban areas, has been readily apparent. The Mitre Corporation concluded that

. . . all cities. . . suffer from loss of community, disruption of life patterns and social alienation. . . . Local community dialogue, made possible by cable, offers one tool that might help to at least partially rebuild a sense of neighborhood, community, and identity.⁷

The Sloan Commission went one step further when it stated that

. . . one would be hard put to find any community. . . that does not have its internal communications problems nor an urge for cohesiveness that is not met by existing media.⁸

There are many reasons why existing communications media can not possibly meet the needs of the entire television audience. The lack of adequate channel facilities is, of course, a major factor. In addition, broadcast television can not be localized or fragmented to the point where it broadcasts only to a particular neighborhood or community. Consequently, much of the entertainment, news, and information supplied via broadcast means is of a general nature and designed to appeal to a large, heterogeneous audience. Paradoxically, information can be disseminated city-wide via the mass media more quickly than within a small geographic neighborhood or community where few local communication channels presently exist.

Cable technology can offer a partial solution to this problem. By providing a means of local dissemination, neighborhood residents can utilize an available public access channel which is inter-connected with other television receivers in the same community. Production facilities have also come within the practical range of community

groups. Only a short time ago a television camera and videotape recorder would be far too costly to be afforded by local community residents. However, the development of the half-inch videotape "porta-pak" has brought the price of production hardware down to a point where it is pragmatically within the means of many grassroots groups. Marshall McLuhan once said that the development of the duplicating machine made each man his own publisher.⁹ Analogously, the development of the half-inch porta-pak combined with cable's potential for neighborhood program dissemination can make each man his own television producer.

The public access channels and the means to produce programming for the channels are now available to the public. The crucial question is: now that the public has access to the television medium, what will they do with it? Will the channels be used at all and if so, will programming be purely for the self-expression of a small group of producers; will programming attempt to imitate the existing formats of broadcast television; or will the programming attempt to increase community communication by providing news, entertainment and information which is currently unavailable via conventional television? These questions formed the basis for this project. Specifically, this study systematically analyzed all public access channel programming on a New York City cable television system in an attempt to answer the following basic questions:

- (1) What was the content of public access channel programming for the initial two year period of operation?
- (2) What initial directions, if any, did access channel programming take during the first two-year period?

Methods

There are currently two cable systems operating in New York City. Each services approximately one-half of the borough of Manhattan and each encompasses several specific geographic neighborhoods and communities within its franchise area. For the purpose of this study, the TelePrompTer Manhattan cable system was used for the analysis.¹⁰ Program content was systematically investigated utilizing content analysis methodology. The content categories for the analysis were derived from the Federal Communication Commission's list of program definitions and were modified for this study.¹¹ All programs cablecast during the period July 1, 1971 through June 30, 1973 on the public access channels were coded into one of the following eleven content categories:

- (1) Entertainment Programming: Programming which presented entertainment for the viewing audience.
- (2) News Programming: Programming which presented the reporting of current local, national, and international events. Only those programs which presented information about events which occurred within 24 hours of the cablecast were included in this category.
- (3) Public Affairs Programming: Programming which presented the audience with information about specific public affairs subjects. For example, programs dealing with Social Security benefits, municipal services, or local school boards would be included.
- (4) Informational Programming: Programming which presented information for the audience about specific topics, subjects, etc.

- (5) Religious Programming: Programming which was essentially concerned with religious topics. Sermons, religious services, or topics dealing with religion or religious information were included.
- (6) Instructional Programming: Programming with the intent of teaching the audience how to perform a particular skill or technique. For example, programs on "how to sew," "how to cook," or "how to exercise," were included in this category.
- (7) Sports Programming: Sporting events or information about sports topics or subjects.
- (8) Political Programming: Programming which dealt with electoral politics, presented a candidate or political debate, or coverage of local political meetings or conventions.
- (9) Children's Programming: Programming which was designed for an audience under 12 years of age.
- (10) Miscellaneous: Programming which could not be categorized due to lack of complete records or where videotapes were unavailable for screening.
- (11) Experimental Art: Programming which utilized the medium of television (and/or film) as a vehicle for artistic expression. In this instance, "the medium is the message." Included in this category were "kinetic art" videotapes, feedback loops and abstract designs, video-art, etc.

Program content was determined from a questionnaire which each producer was required to complete when submitting programming for the access channels. Reliability was checked by a panel of judges and a reliability coefficient of .81 was achieved.¹²

Results

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the programming by program category.

Table 1 about here

Three categories accounted for the largest percentage of programming: "entertainment," "informational" and "instructional." By far, the largest single category for the public access channels was "informational" which accounted for 76 percent of the total programming. However, this result is entirely consistent with the objectives outlined by the regulatory agencies in establishing public access channels as a medium for citizen communication on a local level.

Because the "informational" category accounted for such a large proportion of programming, a further content breakdown of the category was conducted.¹⁵ Programming in the informational category was sub-divided into the following seven categories:

- (1) Ethnic: Programming which appealed specifically to an ethnic audience such as Irish, Italian, Jewish, Afro-American, Chinese, Puerto Rican, etc.
- (2) Community: Programming which reported information about a specific community. Included were programs on block associations, community events and activities, etc.
- (3) Health: Programming which reported information about health and health care such as V.D. clinics, drug abuse information, free health clinics, etc.
- (4) Public Relations: Programming with the intention of publicizing the activities of a particular group or

organization. Such promotional programs as the "activities of local unions," the Lions Club, the Museum of Modern Art, etc. were included in this category.

- (5) General: Programming which presented general information which was not categorized under other headings.
- (6) Consumer: Programming which presented information about consumer affairs. For example, an expose on flammable children's clothing, or a discussion about what to look for in an apartment lease were included in this category.
- (7) Political: Programming which presented political information but which could not be categorized under the major "Political" category. For example, programming supplied by Viet Nam Veterans Against the War," or programming about "the political situation in Haiti," were included in this category.

Table 2 presents the results of this breakdown.

Table 2 about here

It is not surprising to find that over 44 percent of the major "informational" category was devoted to the area of "general information." Apparently, many public access producers viewed the channels as a means of disseminating information on a wide variety of topics and issues. However, almost one-third of all "informational" programming was devoted to material which was of interest to local communities and neighborhoods. In addition, the "ethnic," "health," and "consumer" categories also presented information which was primarily aimed at

local community residents. This suggested that a large proportion of all informational programming, and therefore, a large proportion of all public access programming, was aimed specifically for local audiences.

The relatively insignificant number of political programs among the major content categories can be explained by the fact that during the city's primary and general election campaigns, TelePrompter established a separate channel to accommodate all political candidates who were running for election. Consequently, almost all of the political programming was cablecast on the special channel and did not appear on public access.

The lack of news programming can be attributed to the fact that there were no facilities available for "live" programming. Since the criterion for inclusion in the news category was immediacy, few programs could be categorized under that heading. There were a number of attempts at videotaping events and then delivering the tapes to the studio for air a few hours later. Apparently, however, the producers felt that the considerable effort involved in such a procedure was not worthwhile and most programs were cablecast days and even weeks after the actual event took place.

Tables 3 and 4 present yearly summaries of program content for each of the two years under investigation. The data strongly indicate

Tables 3 and 4 about here

that the channels experienced a substantial growth over the initial two year period, both in terms of the number of programs cablecast and the

amount of air time. While it is difficult to discern any definitive trends over such a short period of time, a number of interesting observations can be made from the available data.

The number of programs cablecast and the amount of air time cablecast both doubled from the first year to the second. During the first year of operation, the access channels cablecast 2,671 programs for a total of 1,954 hours of air time. During the second year, the number of programs cablecast increased to 6,467 for a total of 4,180 hours of air time. In terms of monthly averages, during the first year of public access, an average 162.86 hours of programming aired each month, or 5.26 hours per day. During the second year, the monthly average climbed to 348.61 hours of programming per month and the daily average rose to 11.61 hours per day.

Discussion

The results of the program analysis indicated a steady growth pattern in terms of both the number of programs cablecast and the amount of air time. In addition, over 200 individual producers supplied programming for the channels during the two-year period.¹⁴ While the statistical analysis is certainly revealing, the figures can only present a one-dimensional view of public access channels. What is perhaps even more significant is the type of programming which was being presented over the channels during the period under investigation.

One generalization which can be made is that most of the programs on public access presented content which was, for a variety of reasons, unavailable to the television audience via traditional broadcast stations. Apparently, many public access producers realized that public access offered the potential of reaching specific audiences and programmed their shows accordingly. For example, the Gay Activist

Alliance and Homosexuals Intransigent were two groups who programmed public access shows for a special interest audience which has had little, if any, access to the traditional broadcast media. Yet by utilizing the access channels, they were able to communicate to a segment of the television audience which had not been adequately served by existing television.

Other programming was directed at other audiences which had their own particular communication interests. For example, a number of programs were aimed at non-English speaking audiences. Chung Lo was presented entirely in Chinese, Broadway Hispano and En El Caso entirely in Spanish, and the New York University Deafness Research Institute presented a series of programs in sign language.

Many other programs were produced by local neighborhood community groups and covered events and issues of interest to neighborhood residents. Such local events as school board meetings, street festivals, and mini-documentaries were produced and cablecast on the access channels. These programs had a very local flavor and provided viewers with news and information about their neighborhood which was virtually unavailable via broadcast television. Even the entertainment programming on public access attempted to present a different kind of television than what was readily available commercially. Most entertainment shows relied heavily upon local talent and many presented entertainment for specific audience groups. Bronx United Irish presented Irish entertainment, Broadway Hispano presented Latin entertainment, and Chung Lo, Chinese entertainment.

A sizable number of programs dealt with instructional content in which the producer attempted to teach the audience a particular skill or technique. Watching public access, one could learn how to sew on

Designing with Adua, have Lizalotta Valeska, the former Miss Finland of 1930, teach you health and beauty aids, learn Yoga positions on Yoga for Mind and Body, and even learn to fly on Let's Go Flying.

While much of public access programming attempted to help viewers by informing, educating, or entertaining them, there were a number of programs in which the producers utilized the channels as an "electronic soapbox." J.C. Thomas presented a series entitled the Anti-Establishment Hour which, in an appropriately anti-establishment gesture, ran only 30 minutes. The show was a monologue in which Thomas would offer his opinions on a variety of subjects. A New Jersey stockbroker, Phillip Jordan, lectured on Shakespeare: The Man and His Works, and there were many programs extolling the virtues of acupuncture, astrology, and bio-feedback. Certainly, many of these "soapbox" programs were rather short-lived, some being aired only once. The fact that they were on at all, however, is significant. The channels were established to provide citizen access to the television medium and although it may be questionable how large an audience these "soapbox" shows may have attracted, the producers were given the opportunity to communicate with an audience which was heretofore unavailable to them.

The "soapbox" producers were able to take advantage of the fact that the public access channels were designed to eliminate the gatekeeper as much as possible. Federal regulations stipulate that the cable operator is absolved from any liability on the public access channels. However, the regulations also expect the operator to eliminate programming which contains "obscene or indecent matter."¹⁵ During the two year period under investigation, TelePrompter reported very few problems with the vast majority of programming.¹⁶ However, there was one program which did raise the question of censorship.

The program, Anton Perich Presents, was produced by Anton Perich, a video-artist in the Warholian tradition. His programs were spiced with nudity, profanity, and outrageous premises. On the very first Perich program, one of the actors engaged in an obscene act with a lightbulb and the TelePrompter engineering staff summarily cut the show off the air. The incident received some notoriety in the New York Times and the Village Voice but future Perich shows ran without incident. The only other time during the two-year period TelePrompter was forced to question a program was when the Boy Scouts' Explorer Post 417 produced a videotape in which a nude woman sensually explored her body. The tape was scheduled to air at 4 P.M., an hour it was believed many children might be watching. It was decided to re-schedule the program for a later hour and subsequently ran in its entirety.

While these programs may have been the extreme, there were many public access shows which did not contain any material which could be considered objectionable or obscene, but which did present material in a frank and open manner. There was one program which presented a very explicit discussion about sado-masochistic sex practices. On another discussion, this about transsexuals, one of the participants exposed her genitals on-camera to show the results of her operation. Even in programming which is not at all concerned with sexual content, there is no attempt made to censor either strong language or controversial content. An interesting case in point was a brief documentary program, produced by the Alternate Media Center. When employees of the TelePrompter company walked out on strike in May, 1972, the AMC videotaped a program in which TelePrompter employees stated their grievances against the company. The documentary was then cablecast over

TelePrompTer's public access channels. It seems rather unlikely that a broadcast station, facing a similar situation, would ever permit such a program to be produced or to air.

While at first it may seem strange to see such frank and explicit programming on television, the public access channels are the only means by which a large potential audience can receive programming with such mature content. A potential problem could arise should the channels receive an unjustified reputation as a vehicle for obscene or indecent programming. This seems unlikely, however, since so few programs contained material which might be considered to be at all questionable. In the final analysis, the choice of whether or not to watch such programming remains with the viewer, without the cable operator performing a gatekeeping function. It is rare that such choice is offered on conventional broadcast television.

In summary, the analysis of the first two years of public access channel programming has indicated the following:

- (1) There has been a steady increase in both the amount of air time and in the number of programs cablecast on the channels;
- (2) Much of public access channel programming was community oriented or directed toward a specialized audience which did not receive such programming via conventional broadcasting;
- (3) Most public access channel programming did not attempt to imitate conventional television fare but instead, tried to present material which was unavailable to the audience via broadcast television;
- (4) The growth and utilization pattern for the initial two years of public access suggests that the channels can be a viable medium for communication on a neighborhood level.

While it may be premature to declare the public access experiment in New York City totally successful, certainly the analysis suggests that the channels have met with some initial success. Further studies, particularly an audience analysis, are necessary before making any definitive conclusions. However, the early development of the channels points up a number of interesting theoretical questions which also might be investigated more thoroughly. For example, television has always been viewed as a mass medium in which a relatively few communicators transmit messages to a large, heterogeneous, and unidentifiable audience. Recently, a number of researchers have investigated the possibility that the mass media are evolving toward a more specialized form of communication. Gumpert's "mini-comm" theory hypothesizes that the mass media's hardware is being utilized to reach smaller, more homogeneous and identifiable audiences.¹⁷ Subsequent research tends to support this theory.¹⁸ If this evolution is, in fact, occurring, then public access television may be the first indication of how the television medium will adapt to this new "mini-comm" role.

The gatekeeper function is often indicated in mass communication models. In most communication theory, the gatekeeper provides a service for the receiver by filtering out irrelevant messages and passing along information which the gatekeeper believes will best satisfy the receiver's communication needs. With the elimination or reduction of this gatekeeping process in public access, will the lack of the gatekeeper result in more accurate communication without filtering and distortion or will the plethora of messages produce a situation in which the viewer is simply overloaded with information? Answers to these and other questions concerning the effects of the public access channels on the viewing audience await further research, not only in

New York City but in those areas where public access will be established in the near future.

It is unfortunate that some many of the initial promises which cable technology seemed to offer have proven to be impractical, at least for the present time. However, the public access channels are one example of the utilization of cable technology which can provide positive benefit today without the necessity for future technological developments. The initial experience with public access in New York City seems to indicate the viability of the channels. While all the results of the New York City experience may not be directly generalizable to other cable systems which will soon institute access in their communities, the results do indicate that there is a need for additional information channels on a local, neighborhood level. The results also suggest that if made available, public access channels can be used to increase communication at the grassroots.

Table 1
Summary of Public Access Channel Programming
July 1971 - June 1973

Category	Number of Programs	Amount of Time (in hours)	Percentage of Total Time
Entertainment	1,044	863.06	14.06
News	17	70.53	1.14
Public Affairs	241	174.60	2.84
Informational	6,965	4,378.98	71.37
Religious	221	164.60	2.68
Instructional	333	260.61	4.24
Sports	34	29.73	0.48
Political	7	19.40	0.31
Children's	179	101.00	1.64
Miscellaneous	37	22.86	0.37
Experimental Art	60	49.91	0.81
Total	9,138	6,135.28	99.94

Table 2.
Analysis of "Informational" Category Programming

Category	Number of Programs Cablecast	Percentage of Total Number Cablecast
Ethnic	146	2.09
Community	2,079	29.84
Health	590	8.47
Public Relations	469	6.75
Consumer	174	2.49
Political	381	5.47
General	3,126	44.88
Total	6,965	99.97

Table 3
Yearly Summary of Public Access Channel Programming
July 1971 - June 1972

Category	Number of Programs	Amount of Time (in hours)	Percentage of Total Time
Entertainment	492	389.92	13.95
News	14	61.53	3.14
Public Affairs	103	91.74	4.69
Informational	1,830	1,170.97	59.91
Religious	41	49.10	2.51
Instructional	127	146.71	7.50
Sports	3	1.48	0.07
Political	0	0	0
Children's	11	7.40	0.37
Miscellaneous	12	6.92	0.35
Experimental Art	38	28.59	1.46
Total	2,671	1,954.36	99.95

Table 4
Yearly Summary of Public Access Channel Programming
July 1972 - June 1973

Category	Number of Programs	Amount of Time (in hours)	Percentage of Total Time
Entertainment	552	473.14	11.32
News	3	9.00	0.22
Public Affairs	138	82.86	1.98
Informational	5,135	3,208.01	76.73
Religious	180	115.50	2.76
Instructional	206	113.90	2.72
Sports	31	28.25	0.66
Political	7	19.40	0.46
Children's	168	93.60	2.24
Miscellaneous	25	15.94	0.38
Experimental Art	22	21.32	0.51
Total	6,467	4,180.92	99.98

FOOTNOTES

¹ Federal Communications Commission, "Cable Television Service," Federal Register, XXXVII, 30 (February 12, 1972).

² Richard C. Kletter, Cable Television; Making Public Access Effective (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corp., 1973), p. 1.

³ Sloan Commission on Cable Communications, Report of the Commission, On the Cable: The Television of Abundance (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1971).

⁴ Nicholas Johnson and Gary Gerlach, "The Coming Fight for Public Access," Yale Review of Law and Social Action, II (Spring 1972),

⁵ John E. Ward, "Present and Probable CATV/Broadband Communication Technology," in Sloan Commission on Cable Communications, On the Cable, p. 198.

⁶ Federal Communications Commission, "Cable Television Service," p. 3270.

⁷ William F. Mason, et. al., Urban Cable Systems (McLean, Va.: Mitre Corporation, 1972), p. II-5.

⁸ Sloan Commission, On the Cable, p. 126

⁹ Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 268.

¹⁰During the two year period under investigation, TelePrompter programmed significantly more public access programming than did the the other cable system. In fact, much of TelePrompter's programming was simulcast on the other system via an inter-connect arrangement. For more information, see David Othmer, et. al. The Wired Island (New York: Fund for the City of New York, 1973), Appendix III.

¹¹Sydney Head, Broadcasting in America, 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), pp. 389-390.

¹²Formula for coefficient of reliability from Ole R. Holsti, Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 133-134.

¹³Since this was an initial investigation of public access program content, it was impossible to determine prior to the investigation that the informational category would account for such a large percentage of the programming.

¹⁴A complete listing of all public access producers and their programming is available from the author.

¹⁵Federal Communications Commission, "Cable Television Service," p. 3271.

¹⁶TelePrompter was able to come to an agreement with Perich concerning the content of his programs and the rest of his series was cablecast without incident. A more serious censorship issue was recently raised in June, 1974. Michael Luckman, producer of a program entitled The Underground Tonight Show, informed TelePrompter that he

intended to air a program containing explicitly sexual material. TelePrompTer previewed the tape and censored seven minutes of programming. The producer threatened to use the incident as a test case in a suit against the company to determine the limit of censorship on the access channels. As of this writing no legal action had yet been taken but the incident suggests that ultimately the courts will determine the legal liability of the cable company in terms of access channel program content.

¹⁷Gary Gumpert, "The Rise of Mini-Comm," Journal of Communication, XX (September 1970), 280-90.

¹⁸See, Richard Maisel, "The Decline of Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly, XXXVII (Summer 1973), 159-70; and John C. Merrill and Ralph L. Lowenstein, Media Messages and Men (New York: David McKay Co., 1971), pp. 33-44.